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Anglican Women's Studies Centre

Discovering A Feminine Godde

By Sr Therese Parkin COS



American artist Harmonia Rosales 2017 work "The Creation of God" is a reimagining of Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam' depicting both God and the first man as black women.

"And the Lord said..." preached the priest at the parish I was attending, and suddenly, everything changed.

"Why does it have to be "the Lord"?" I thought. "We know God is above and beyond gender, but I only ever hear God referred to using male pronouns and male terms. Can God be Mother as well as Father? Can God be ... Lady?" That thought was the beginning of the seismic shift in my theology, my practice, and my life.

Until that moment, I had lived my faith in a conventional (but hopefully courageous) way. I studied English Literature and Reli-

gious Studies in my BA, and then went on to complete a Bachelor of Ministries degree from the-then Bible College of New Zealand, with a focus on spiritual formation. During my time at BCNZ, I returned to my Anglican roots, and was Confirmed as an Anglican not long after I married my husband in 2001.

I joined the Third Order Franciscans not long after we married, and I transferred my vows to a Benedictine community a few years later, as I found the Benedictine vows of stability, conversion of life, and obedience to God a much easier fit for a married woman than poverty, chastity and obedience! Our daugh-



ter, then aged 4, assisted me at my vows by vesting me in the Benedictine habit – she has grown up with a mother who works fulltime, is married and a nun, and is quite happy with all of that, as is my husband who is my strongest supporter!

Fast-forward five years. My small family were attending a small Anglican church and living our lives as a youngish couple with a small child. Everything was seemingly normal. I was reading voraciously, as is my lifelong habit, and one of the books I read around that time was Sue Monk Kidd's *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. And then, from left field, comes this thought: why do I never hear God addressed by female names? And following on from that, what is wrong with being female, that (according to Augustine and other male early church leaders) means women cannot be seen as *imago Dei*, fully created in the image of God *as women*?

St Augustine said that,

“Woman does not possess the image of God in herself but only when taken together with the male who is her head, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned the role as helpmate, a function that pertains to her alone, then she is not the image of God. But as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the image of God just as fully and completely as when he and the woman are joined together into one.”

I dived into the most serious theological and historical study I had ever done (including the six years I spent doing my degrees) – certainly the most fraught. This felt like a life-or-death situation – the life or death of my ability to respect myself as a woman, the life or death of my ability to connect with the divine.

Is there historical and theological support for calling God by female names?

To my great delight (and relief), there is ample biblical, theological and historical evidence for addressing the Most Holy by female names. I discovered that the translations made of the Bible had frequently changed female names for people, as well as mistranslating female terms and names for the divine. For example, the ancient Hebrew “El Shaddai” is usually translated “The Almighty”, assuming that the term derives from *shadad*, burly or powerful, or *shadah*, “mountains”. However, many Hebrew scholars now understand that El Shaddai derives from *Shad* meaning breast – El Shaddai therefore translates as the Many-Breasted One. The ancient habit of translating the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name for God, as “LORD”, further reinforced the incorrect assumption that only

male language was acceptable to name the Most High.

The usage of “Father/abba” to relate to the Holiest is only used 4 times in Mark, 15 in Luke, 49 in Matthew, and 109 times in John (the Gospels were written in that order, from around 60-120AD) - surely a sign of a growing community usage, rather than Jesus' actual words. Given the Gospels had earlier sources now lost to us, it is possible that the term “father” was used infrequently by Jesus, and was then latched onto by his followers as a quiet and subconscious way of reinforcing the Graeco-Roman worldview of men as *pater familias*, the head of the household, and its use encouraged and strengthened through the years by those reinforcing male leadership and power.

I came to understand that, if we only use male names for God, then that subtly implies that only men are made in God's image. When we use only male terminology for God and for people in our liturgy, worship, preaching and teaching, we subtly reinforce this incorrect, outdated understanding of God and imply that maleness is “normal” and somehow being female means we are less.

Theologically, we understand that God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, and as omnipotent and all-powerful, God will not be limited by gender, and nor should our language for God put God's power and presence in a box of limited male terms. St Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) called God Mother in her sermons; so too did Julian of Norwich (c1342-1416). Yet despite extensive biblical, historical and theological evidence, including discussions within our own Anglican tradition in New Zealand and overseas over the last 50 years or more, we still continue to primarily name God by male names.

I began to look closely at the liturgy and Bible translations we use. I translated the entire Benedictine daily prayer cycle into gender neutral and expansive terms (where female and male names are used equally) for my own use as a Lenten devotion in 2014. I then tackled *A New Zealand Prayer Book/He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*. I wrote a version of the Eucharistic liturgy p.404 that removed all male terms for God, replacing them with female or gender-neutral terms. Not being a priest, I was not able to use this, but it was an exercise in trying to find out what it might feel like to be in a liturgy where God was addressed openly as Sophia, Mother, Lady, She. I began to look for versions of the Bible where the names for God were not changed, and discovered both *The Inclusive Bible*, and even more powerful, *The Divine Feminine Version* of the New Testament, and began to experience the scriptures with a new voice.

I found that I could not keep silent about the explosion of love that I had felt since I had openly embraced calling God by fe-



male names – my favourites being She Who Is, following Elizabeth Johnson's book of the same name that was the beginning of the strong theological backbone I needed, Sophia (the Greek translation of Hokmah or Wisdom), and Mother or Lady. I began to think about Jesus as the incarnation of Holy Sophia in the continuation of the Wisdom tradition, which a lot of scholars had identified, and reflected that the Holy Child could be thought of as the Child of the Mother. I began to discuss my discovery of She Who Is with others.

And that's where things got complicated.

There was a lot of support, often from older Christian friends that had gone through the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, several of whom had been closely involved with the Anglican Church and the Prayer Book Commission. There was also stonewalling, accusations of heresy, and refusal to engage with the theology and history, particularly from some male priests who clung to patriarchy like a ragged, worn-out old blanket that they wouldn't, or couldn't, let go of.

I tried everything. I spoke, with love, to friends and acquaintances at churches – my own and others. I spoke with my husband and daughter, who have both journeyed with me on this discovery of She Who Is Godde (the term I now prefer for the divine – it is an old medieval spelling for the divine, and is completely neutral with no male connotations such as "God" has). I spoke with passion to our churchwardens and parish priests, describing my journey and trying to engage with them over the theological and historical information I had gleaned through at least five years of intensive study, prayer and reflection.

I felt unwelcome in regular church liturgy because I only ever heard Godde named by male names, and that no longer named my experience of her. I changed the words when I was singing hymns (first resigning from the church choir) and participating in liturgy, substituting she for he so I could be pre-

sent in church. When I used a female name for Godde, Sophia, Holy Wisdom, when leading intercessions one Sunday in 2016, I was formally censured by my parish priest and removed from all rosters in the parish where I, and my dangerous ideas about Godde, might be expressed publicly. Patriarchy was rampant.

I did find allies – people that felt the same as me, who had sought Sophia/Wisdom and found her, as we are enjoined to do in Proverbs and Wisdom. They helped me keep up my courage. In the end, in desperation, I sought a meeting with our People's Warden asking what I could do, as our parish priest completely refused to engage in conversation about this topic with us. The Warden recommended we put motions

to our parish AGM – which we did, seeking removal of male terms when the whole of humanity was meant, and seeking education for the parish and changes in our language for Godde in church.

So how did it all turn out? Well, the parish priest would not allow the motions on the naming of Godde to even be put at the AGM (giving us no warning of this so we couldn't even amend the motions) and refusing to allow discussion on the naming of Godde. I wasn't even allowed to speak to the motion I was trying to put (which had been notified to the parish according to the

correct protocol, three weeks before the AGM). The priest tried to undermine the motion on naming of people by putting a much weaker motion from the chair, but at least there is some intention to remove terms such as "mankind" and "man/men" when they are intended to refer to all people. The motion on educating the parish on the female names for Godde was passed, after my husband spoke with calm eloquence, identifying that his experience of the journey was that knowing Godde by male-only terms was missing so much of the richness of Godde's nature.

And where does that leave me? I am still reading, still re-



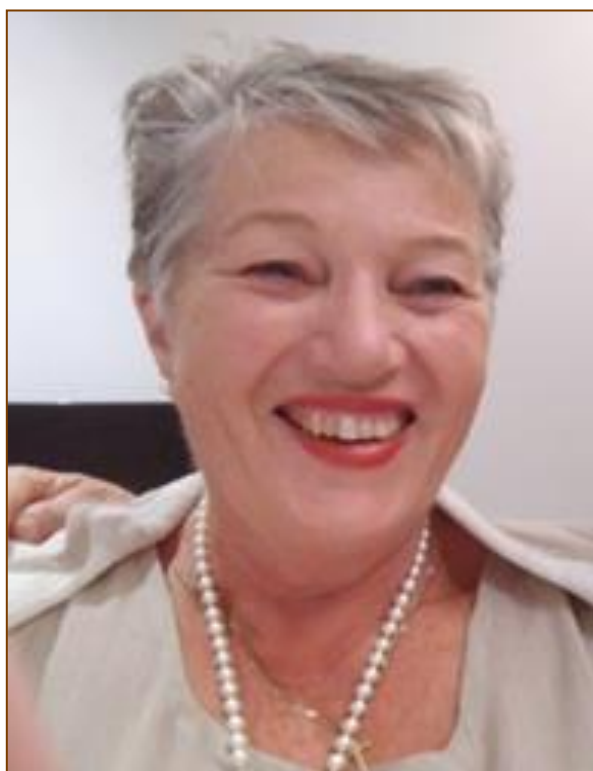


searching – trying to identify what it might do to the way the church treats people, the way Christians treat people, if we viewed Godde as our Mother. How might we respect her world, if we thought about it as birthed by her? How might we show love one to another, if all of our people could see and hear of Godde in terms that show that, no matter what flesh you are born into, you are fully born and bearing Godde's image? I am still lighting candles of hope in her name, praying in the stillness of the night sky, walking the beach and hearing the water crash on the shore, filling her footprints left there by some other person who walked before me and carries her name.

I am calling out her name in the world, and naming patriarchy and misuse of male power wherever I see it.

I cannot un-see or un-know what I now know, the experiences of her love I have had. My image of Godde is forever changed – much bigger, wider, deeper, more beautiful, richer. I am a different person since I encountered Godde the Mother, Godde the Creatrix, Godde the Incarnate Child, Godde Holy Wisdom. I have found my image was in her all along – I just couldn't see it, because the language we use for God told me that only men were made in God's image. Women were only mothers, not fathers – but now Godde is my Mother I can find myself in her.

Moving & Accepting Change



By Revd Rosemary Carey
AWSC Waiapu Link Representative

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure... You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles* (Harper Collins: 1992), 190-191.

I have over the past 46 years, followed my husband as he took on new roles; first in Education and then in the Anglican Church. The moves offered me and our three girls, excitement and opportunities to make new friends, discover new places and develop my own teaching and ministry. I often recalled the Brownie song, “Make new friends, but keep the old... one is silver and the other gold”. We settled in quickly and en-

joyed the space and place in all of our moves.

The moves were also scary and challenging times calling me to adjust, adapt and resettle the family. It was more difficult for me, as I didn't, like my husband did, have an instant community to connect with. I learnt quickly that home is where the heart is, and as long as we were together and strong in our faith, all would be well.



I was 49 when I set out to obtain my first degree. It was liberating but hard work. Like many other women, I studied part-time while juggling the roles of mother, wife, teacher or priest.

Is this why we are strong as women because we are able to juggle so many different balls at a time?

After I had gained a Diploma in Special Education, I was awarded an NZEI scholarship in 2004, which enabled me to study full time for a whole year, to complete my Bachelor Teaching Degree. Then it was time to concentrate on achieving a Diploma of Theology. I was ordained as a Vocational Deacon in 2002 and Priesthood in 2007. During this time, I was also writing my historical novel, "The Walnut Legacy" which took 12 years to research, write and get published in 2010.

In 2013 we moved from the Waikato to Havelock North, Hawkes Bay. As I was 63, I planned to retire and enjoy being a full-time 'Vicar's wife'. However, I was offered a PTO (Permission to Officiate) which opened new doors to Hospital Chaplaincy, and as a relief School Chaplain, which I responded to and enjoyed immensely. The roles helped establish myself in our new place. However, when I was 67, I decided to retire from paid employment, much to the pleasure of my family!

Permission to Officiate was again offered to enable me to continue priestly ministry when required. I belong to a busy Parish, and the Vicar's role is demanding, so it was good to be able to offer respite and to help out with some of the ministry tasks. I was also invited to join the Parish Ministry team which meets regularly and offers collegiality and support.

In the past when I was asked that common question, "What do you do?", I always had an answer, "I teach, I preach, I am an ordained Priest, I'm a Teacher, a Vicar, an Enabler, a Hospital Chaplain, a School Chaplain, a Writer, depending what I was doing at the time. It took a holiday away after my retirement, to rediscover me ... Rosemary. To strip away all the other identities and recognise the most important ones were still present: they are; I am dearly beloved child of God, a wife, mother, grandmother, sister, friend and encourager. I meet with others struggling with the process of a loss of identity, who have had major changes in their lives, often not by their choice, and together we discover the importance of

simply being content.

People often ask me, "How is retirement?" I tell them it feels good to be free. Free to have choices. Free to write and free to be where ever God calls me to be.

AWSC has been life giving for me in this space of time. It feels good to know I still do have a voice, still do have a purpose, and still do have a sense of belonging. It is a place where my past experiences and wisdom can serve to encourage and empower others.

My writing bubbles away, and I am now completing the sequel of "The Walnut Tree". There is no pressure, no time restraint. I am content with "my daily bread" and try not look beyond that. I am still growing in faith, and for that I am grateful. I am especially grateful for all my 'Sisters and Brothers in Christ', who are all around the world. They inspire and encourage me to be the best 'Woman of God' I can be.

We are blessed with three married daughters, an adopted son and eight grandchildren.

I have lived, loved, laughed, wept, taught and ministered in the following places: Palmerston North - 2 years; England - 3 years; Hamilton - 3 years; Bennydale - 1 year; Ranfurly - 2 years; Naseby - 2 years; returned to Hamilton - 5 years; Oliver, British Columbia, Canada - 1 year; Clandon Christian Community, Horsham Downs - 7 years; St Johns Theological College, Auckland - 3 years; Tirau Vicarage - 3 years; back to Hamilton - 7 years (5 in our own home and 2 years on the Waikato Diocesan School grounds); Morrinsville Vicarage -3 years; Havelock North Vicarage - 3 years and now Hastings - currently in our own home for the last 2 years.

I have taught in all areas of Education, holding several different responsibility filled roles, from a Sole-Charge Principal, as an Advisor for Special Needs, as Senior teacher, as Head of Department and as Deputy Principal. In the Anglican Church, I have been a Lay Representative for Synod, a Vocational Priest, a Vicar, and an Enabler.

Now I am a very contented iceberg, drifting towards home, with only the most important identity of who I am, left to be seen above the water line. Blessings Rosemary





Anglican Women’s Studies Centre (AWSC)

Karena de Pont, Administrator

Email: anglicanwomenstudies@gmail.com

Home Office Phone: +64 9 422-0102 Cell Phone: 027 631-3083

General Synod Office Phone: +64 9 521-4439 www.anglican.org.nz

Postal: General Synod Office, PO Box 87188, Auckland 1742, New Zealand



The Centre for Anglican Women’s Studies, commonly known as the Anglican Women’s Studies Centre was set up to serve and to advance the interests and needs of the women of this Church particularly those undertaking Theological training.

The Link Representatives from each Diocese and Hui Amorangi have been chosen for their leadership ability to identify, gather, facilitate, resource and encourage women in their educational preparation for ministry whether lay or ordained. It is hoped that the Anglican Women’s Studies Centre can continue to enjoy the support of each Diocese and Hui Amorangi in this endeavour.

The issue of increasing numbers of women in representative positions across the councils and committees of the Church is seen as a high priority and the practice of intentional mentoring by those already in national and international representative roles is seen as a good way to expose women of this Church to fulfil their potential as leaders.

Ensuring that women’s voices and stories are heard now and in the future is also one of our continued aims whether it be by traditional methods of publication or using more contemporary technologies like web publication. We remain optimistic that through continued support, the needs of women throughout this Province will be valued and recognized.

Council for the Anglican Women’s Studies Centre—2016/2018

TIKANGA MAORI—

† The Ven Mere Wallace
nganehu.mere@gmail.com

† Revd Numia Tomoana
revnumia@gmail.com

TIKANGA PAKEHA—

† The Ven Carole Hughes (Convener)
carolesunrise@xtra.co.nz

† Revd Helen Roud
helen.roud@gmail.com

TIKANGA POLYNESIA—

† Kelera (Nai) Cokanasiga
keleranai@yahoo.com

† Revd Evelini Langi
meleevelini.langi@gmail.com

AWSC Diocesan & Hui Amorangi Link Representatives

TIKANGA POLYNESIA—

*Refer to Tikanga Polynesian Councillors
(see above)*

TIKANGA MAORI—

Hui Amorangi o te Tairawhiti

† Ruihana Paenga
ruihanapaenga@gmail.com

Hui Amorangi o te Taitokerau

† Revd Jenny Quince
quincemail@xtra.co.nz

Hui Amorangi o te Manawa o te Wheke

† Revd Bettina Maxwell
taumau@xtra.co.nz

Hui Amorangi o te Upoko o te Ika

† The Ven Leonie Joseph
raulee04@xtra.co.nz

Diocese of Te Waipounamu

† Keely-Anne Robinson
keelyrobinson23@yahoo.co.nz

TIKANGA PAKEHA—

Diocese of Auckland

† Revd Nyasha Gumbeze
tamarisk1999@yahoo.co.nz

Diocese of Christchurch

*Refer to Tikanga Pakeha Councillors
(see above)*

Diocese of Dunedin

† Jo Fielding
joanna.fielding@hotmail.com

Diocese of Nelson

† Kaye Dyer
kaye@mightymessage.com

Diocese of Waiaapu

† Revd Rosemary Carey
rbcarey.carey@gmail.com

Diocese of Waikato & Taranaki

† The Ven Val Riches
vjriches@outlook.com

Diocese of Wellington

† Revd Annette Cater
revannette@gmail.com

EDITORIAL DISCLAIMER: The Anglican Women’s Studies Centre is committed to encouraging and enabling women’s voices and perspectives from across the diversity of the Church to be shared more widely. We acknowledge that women’s experiences of church differ considerably and that resultant theological perspectives also differ considerably. In general, the AWSC does not exercise editorial control, rather we welcome as many voices as are willing to contribute.